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Iran: The Meaning of Moharram

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Summary

The Muslim month of mourning in Iran, Moharram—which starts on 21 November this year—is the first month of the Islamic calendar year and commemorates the death in the seventh century A.D. of one of Shia Islam's most revered founders. The emotion evoked yearly by that 1,300-year-old event is unmatched in the Islamic world.

In Iran the ceremonies connected with Moharram have often been used to express political opposition. The xenophobic emotions generated by Moharram contributed last year to the ouster of the Shah. This year the same forces are likely to focus on political hostility toward the United States.

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Historical Setting

On 1 October 680 A.D., which was the first day of the month of Moharram and 46 years after the death of Mohammad, two Arab Muslim armies faced each other on the west bank of the Euphrates River at the Kerbala plain south of present-day Baghdad. The two forces were poorly matched. On the one side were 4,000 men of the forces of Yazid, Caliph of Islam in Damascus, and on the other some two hundred followers (in Arabic, Shia) of Hossein, grandson of Mohammad, who disputed Yazid's claim to be Caliph and considered himself the rightful successor of the Prophet.

Hossein was surrounded and for 10 days occasional skirmishes alternated with periods of negotiation. On the 10th day Yazid's forces opened an all-out attack and the battle went on until late in the afternoon. Finally, with all his followers dead, Hossein dashed into the midst of his enemies. The final blow was dealt by Shimar, according to Shia tradition, which also records that Hossein's body bore 23 spear wounds and 34 from swords. Hossein's head was cut off and his body trampled in the dust by Yazid's horsemen. The Shia believe that the head, which was initially sent to Yazid, subsequently was returned to Kerbala and is buried there in Hossein's shrine.

This event—the Tragedy at Kerbala the Shiites call it—is at the center of the Moharram mourning period. For centuries the yearly reenactment of the death of Hossein at the hands of Yazid (although he was not present) and Shimar has aroused intense emotion among all classes throughout the country. The occasion has often been used to voice veiled political comment; a sermon by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1963, in which he explicitly compared the Shah to the tyrant Yazid, was a major factor in the Ayatollah's exile.

The Ceremonies

The mourning ceremonies occur in several forms: recitations of the story of Hossein in the mosque combined with a sermon, recitations in private homes, dramatic presentations in public, and parades. Whatever the form, the intention is to incite the participants to a frenzy of weeping, wailing, flagellations, and beatings. If their tears are mingled with blood, the participants gain even greater merit.

Descriptions of actual occurrences best give a feel for the occasion. In Tehran as many as 3,000 worshippers, mostly men, may be gathered in a large bazaar mosque. Around the mosque for many blocks crowds are

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gathered so tightly that movement is barely possible. The crowd consists mainly of paraders who are just forming up or who have ended a parade at the mosque.

Inside the mosque several mullahs in succession preach sermons on the Hossein theme. As each speaker reaches the climax of the story, weeping and wailing increases. Finally, the main speaker begins. He starts with a sermon dwelling on the virtues and suffering of the family of Ali and then begins the chanting of the Hossein narrative. Again, as the story reaches its climax, the decapitation of Hossein, the weeping and groaning increases in volume and many begin to pound their foreheads and beat their chests. Finally, the sermon ends and the crowd begins to subside. Some may remain at the mosque all day listening to repetitions of the narrative, others may join one of the many parades that are being held and still others may go to other mosques or private homes for further commemoration ceremonies.

The public parades, which go on throughout the first 10 days of Moharram, are basically the same whether they occur in Tehran with thousands of participants or in a small village with only a dozen.

The parades are arranged by a group specifically organized for that purpose and usually represent a district, a neighborhood, or the members of a mosque. Often this group—called a *dasteh*—meets year round, not only to plan for the ceremonies but also as a social-religious group that studies the Koran, listens to recitations of the Hossein story and discusses politics. A parade is often preceded by a meal sponsored by someone in the district to which are invited the members of the *dasteh*, prominent people, and the poor. After the meal the leader of the *dasteh* begins chanting a lament in verse accompanied by rhythmical beating of the chest. The parade then moves outside and through the streets preceded and followed by black banners and stopping at each mosque or shrine in the area. This may go on all day and far into the night.

On Ashura, the 10th day of Moharram and the day on which Hossein and his family were murdered, the major ceremonies take place. The parades begin to form up at sunrise. The breast beating resumes and the parade moves through the streets to a central square where several *dastehs* may be gathered. All join in a final breast beating; a mullah seated on a raised platform then recites the Hossein story. Following the recitation the symbols are brought out: black and green standards and the centerpiece, the *nakhl*. This is a sort of sedan chair, so large that 40 or 50 men may be required to carry it on their shoulders, representing the vehicle in which Hossein and his relatives were carried to the final battle at Kerbala. The bearers enter the

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square at a trot, turning around twice as they enter. They circle the assembled *dastehs* three times and then settle down on the fringes of the crowd. The combined *dastehs* form themselves into large circles and, under the leadership of a chanter in the center, breast beating again begins and the whole circle moves one step to the right with each beat. Finally, at a drum signal, this part of the ceremony ends and the depiction on stage of the tragedy at Kerbala begins.

The drama, which may go on for several hours, recounts a story that is well known to all those watching but it never fails to excite the most intense emotion. Moharram parades were once marked not only by beating the chest and forehead but also by flagellation and slashing with knives. These practices were suppressed by the government starting in 1928 but have occurred occasionally since then. Given the present state of religious tension it would not be surprising to see a resurgence of the more bloody aspects of the traditional celebration.

Political Symbolism

Although the Moharram events deal with an occurrence 13 centuries old, they frequently have been used as a vehicle to attack whatever regime was in power, as well as to voice antiforeign sentiments. Last year the Shah fell from power in the closing days of Moharram. This year the sermons will doubtless focus on the United States, and the extreme emotionalism surrounding Moharram will only add fuel to an already highly volatile situation in Tehran. Anti-American sentiment is running high, and if the United States is singled out for vituperation—as is likely—it may further complicate efforts to gain the release of the US Embassy hostages. In any event, the Moharram celebrations will certainly be used by Khomeini to revitalize mass support in Iran for his regime.

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